

S H E R M A N I R B Y ' S

I N F E R N O



JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER ORCHESTRA WITH WYNTON MARSALIS



That haunting trombone cry about four seconds into the overture of Sherman Irby's *Inferno*? That's some down-home blues right there. And with that bit of Southern hospitality that reflects the composer's roots, one's immediately welcomed into Irby's musical world—or rather, underworld.



After all, *Inferno* is Irby's interpretation of Dante's epic 14th-century poem of the same name, which follows the author on his imagined, harrowing journey through the nine circles of Hell.

Listen beyond that opening trombone cry to when the horns all begin scowling and barking at each other. Yes, Irby's Southern roots are immediately apparent, but so is the life he's led since leaving his

hometown of Tuscaloosa, Alabama. In addition to his time with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis (JLCO), Irby has worked with Elvin Jones, James Cleveland, Roy Hargrove, Papo Vazquez, McCoy Tyner, and Marcus Roberts, and his diverse influences are on full display in the gumbo that is *Inferno*.

Art reflects the time in which it was created. Dante completed The Divine Comedy (of which *Inferno* was part one of three) in 1320, during a time of great political upheaval and 18 years after he was exiled from his hometown of Florence. He seems to have written many of his enemies into the work as a way of getting back at them.

While jazz certainly embodies freedom, Irby's *Inferno* represents another timely message. In today's world of division, hype, and distractions, where mankind can be manipulated by algorithms and become addicted to a phone's beep, we're constantly reminded that our basic instincts are animalistic. However, there is an intelligence and cleverness to Irby's rich, multi-layered, powerfully compelling *Inferno* that reminds of us of that which makes us human. Of course, all kinds of music have the ability to help us transcend. But it's hard to think of another genre besides jazz that can capture so many different—and often conflicting—feelings all at the same time. Irby's *Inferno* is filled with a wide range of feelings, intelligent and dense harmonies, and thoughtful, irresistible rhythms. This isn't simply a jazz version of an old poem; this is an important musical piece that matters today.

The power of Irby's timely and compelling *Inferno* lies in its uniqueness and intelligence. And, of course, its swing. This is "Irby's main goal above all else," says fellow JLCO bandmate Chris Crenshaw, whose musical interpretation of James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* premiered on the same concert as Irby's *Inferno* in 2012.

Irby's affection for his JLCO bandmates is clear in his writing. Crenshaw comments that "Sherman cares for his brethren, and he cares about this music, and that goes a long way."

"I wrote this act for Joe Temperley," Irby remarks. "He was the band's elder statesman and musical guide for almost 30 years. It was my honor to feature his beautiful, passionate sound as the voice of the central character, Dante."



[Joe Temperley's]
sound contained
the breadth of his
years, tempered by
the ups and downs
of man's journey
through life.

— Sherman Irby

While Duke Ellington, Mary Lou Williams, and others have composed suites and religious pieces, it really is hard to find a precedent for a piece like this. After all, here we have a six-movement suite featuring a big band interpreting an epic poem.

That said, with or without Dante's story as context, Irby's *Inferno* would stand on its own.

Irby's intelligence and unique way of honoring and expanding on tradition is exemplified in Movement One, "House Of Unbelievers." This movement depicts the first circle of hell whose inhabitants are the souls who did not believe in God (but have not sinned). This category includes poets, scientists, philosophers, unbaptized infants, and kings of non-Christian lands.

In depicting this circle, Irby envisioned a cocktail party. "The guests," he says, "are greeted with brass fanfares and people entertained by a big band. The solos reflect those guests at the party."

Listen to the rich, lush harmonies, the relaxed swing, the playful flutes and the crisp horns. It may feel familiar, but it isn't, and that's part of the magic that makes Irby's journey into the unknown so exciting.

Movement Two, entitled "Insatiable Hunger," highlights circles two and three, both of which, in Irby's words, "contains souls who were lustful and consumed and destroyed others and those whose gluttonies destroyed themselves."



This feeling is put to a groove that Crenshaw describes as “minimalistic but powerful and meaningful (and funky to say the least).” Irby says he created it by “grouping the band in pairs, representing people doing their own thing inside of a big room; if an observer takes a step back, they will see the many turn into a single, pulsating organism.”

Irby’s goal for Movement Three, “Beware The Wolf and The Serpent,” (which depicts circles four and five, home to the avaricious and wrathful) was to capture a feeling of “senseless fighting.” As Irby says, he accomplished this by “dividing the orchestra in half, while keeping the trombones interacting with both. I even have the soloists interrupting each other. Total disrespect to each other and to themselves. The human condition...”

Movement Four depicts circle six and the heretics now condemned to spend all of eternity burning in their graves. Entitled “The City of Dis,” this movement is named for the land on the other side of the River Styx that contains the final four circles of Hell. After the choir of drumrolls and playfully dissonant harmonies take listeners ashore, they find themselves on new, exotic ground. “I wanted to get the flavor of Iranian ‘belly dancing’ music, while maintaining a bit of the swing groove,” Irby says.

Movement Five, “The Three-Headed Serpent,” depicts circle seven, home to those who have committed violence against others, themselves, or God. As Irby says, “There’s a lot of fighting in this one, like two dogs sniffing each other.” It’s here that “the band goes to war.” The fighting is illustrated by the various sections trying to talk over one another.

Movement Six portrays circles eight (for those who victimized others) and nine (for those, like Cain and Judas Iscariot, who victimized others with whom they shared a special bond). Chris Crenshaw says, “One of my favorite pieces is ‘The Great Deceiver’ because it has different grooves; it features many of us; it has functional dissonance representing the cold nature of the piece Sherman intended; and it’s comparable to a movie score with surprise after surprise.” Irby’s goal here was “to create the imagined sound of a violent, frozen Hell.” To accomplish this, he “used the upper woodwinds and trombones in their highest ranges. It is supposed to sound like it hurts, with the trumpets to give a short bit of relief before the pain starts again (probably the cruellest form of torture).”

Inferno’s lush, sweeping, swinging, and reflective finale, “The Shores

of Mount Purgatory,” marks Dante’s arrival at the foot of Mount Purgatory. As Irby remarks, “It’s difficult to write a large work for the jazz orchestra without paying an homage to its greatest composer, Duke Ellington. I waited to do this for the finale because I wanted Joe, who was once a member of Ellington’s orchestra, to be the last voice of the story.”

It’s a touching end to a remarkable piece, and it reflects Irby’s optimistic outlook. *Inferno* reflects the unique essence of jazz that brings joy to the sadness, playfulness to the serious, and vice-versa. Just as one can only get to heaven by passing through hell, Irby’s *Inferno* reminds us that there’s light at the end of the tunnel.

—Joe Alterman

1. OVERTURE: LOST

Solo: Joe Temperley
(baritone saxophone)

2. MOVEMENT I: HOUSE OF UNBELIEVERS

Solos: Ted Nash (flute)
Victor Goines (clarinet)
Chris Crenshaw (trombone)

All movements composed by Sherman Irby
Sherman Irby Publishing (BMI)

3. MOVEMENT II: INSATIABLE HUNGER

Solos: Walter Blanding (tenor and soprano saxophones)
Vincent Gardner (trombone)

4. MOVEMENT III: BEWARE THE WOLF AND THE SERPENT

Solos: Sherman Irby (alto saxophone)
Elliot Mason (trombone)
Wynton Marsalis (trumpet)

5. MOVEMENT IV: THE CITY OF DIS

Solos: Walter Blanding (soprano saxophone and oboe)
Ted Nash (flute)

6. MOVEMENT V: THE THREE- HEADED SERPENT

Solos: Ali Jackson (drums)
Victor Goines (tenor saxophone)
Ted Nash (alto saxophone)
Kenny Rampton (trumpet)
Marcus Printup (trumpet)
Dan Nimmer (piano)

7. MOVEMENT VI: THE GREAT DECEIVER / FINALE: THE SHORES OF MOUNT PURGATORY

Solos: Carlos Henriquez (bass)
Dan Nimmer (piano)
Joe Temperley (baritone saxophone)



PERSONNEL

THE JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER ORCHESTRA WITH WYNTON MARSALIS

REEDS

Sherman Irby

(alto and soprano saxophones,
flute, piccolo, clarinet)

Ted Nash (alto saxophone,
flute, piccolo, clarinet)**Victor Goines** (tenor and
soprano saxophones, Bb and
bass clarinets)**Walter Blanding** (tenor
and soprano saxophones,
oboe, clarinet)**Joe Temperley** (baritone
and soprano saxophones,
bass clarinet)

TRUMPETS

Ryan Kisor**Kenny Rampton****Marcus Printup****Wynton Marsalis**

RHYTHM SECTION

Dan Nimmer (piano)**Carlos Henriquez** (bass)**Ali Jackson** (drums)

TROMBONES

Vincent Gardner**Chris Crenshaw****Elliot Mason**

(trombone and bass trumpet)

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Recorded on May 19, 2012 at Jazz at Lincoln
Center's Frederick P. Rose Hall.

Support for Blue Engine Records is provided
in part by the Arnhold Family, Jay Pritzker
Foundation, Dalio Foundation, and Boulé
Foundation.

Additional support is provided by Diana and
Joseph DiMenna, Robert and Helen Appel,
Lisa Schiff, Leonard and Louise Riggio, and
David and Thelma Steward.





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